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SHRINES OF THE DESERT

By Dwight L. Elmendorf

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

THE fourth century of the Christian era witnessed the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire in Africa, owing partly to the schism of the Donatists, which grievously afflicted both Church and state for nearly a century. Jealousy among the native governors, insurrections, and violent revolutions rendered the country an easy prey to the enemies of the empire. Genseric, the king of the Vandals, landed in Africa in the year 429 and was speedily joined by the native Moors and the wild, fanatical Donatists. With these allies he seized the six provinces of Rome one after the other. The rough northmen, however, soon fell into the luxurious habits of the Romans they had conquered, and it was not long before they had to succumb to the Byzantine Empire, which had sent Belisarius with a large fleet and army to Carthage in the year 533. The Vandal forces were completely worsted in the first encounter. Belisarius was succeeded by his most illustrious general, Solomon, who restored many of the Roman strongholds, but was finally killed before the walls of Theveste while endeavoring to repress an insurrection of the warlike Berber tribes of that neighborhood. The Vandal power was destroyed, but that of the Byzantines was never fully established. In the seventh century the country suffered an invasion from a new quarter. The Khalifa Othman determined to effect the conquest of Africa. The brother of the Khalifa, Abdulla Ibn Säad was given command of a magnificent army of 40,000 picked men. The invaders met the forces of Gregorius on the plain of Acouba, and after several days of fierce fighting the Christian forces were utterly defeated. Shortly afterward Ibn Säad and his followers returned to the East laden with spoil.

In 665, another army from the East was sent out under the command of Okba bin Nafa, and this time the Mohammedans retained what they again conquered. The province of Ifrika was formed and the Moors and the Berbers adopted without trouble the name and religion of the Arabs. Fifty years later a Mussulman governor reported that there was no longer cause to raise the tax imposed upon Christian subjects. Thus was swept away the African Church, which had been adorned by the names of Augustine, Tertullian and Cyprian.

The Arabs under Okba continued their triumphant advance westward and the valiant general Tarik, landing at Gibraltar (Jebel el Tarik or Hill of Tarik), carried the Crescent into Europe. It is more than remarkable that this comparatively small band of invaders should have conquered in a few years the vast territory that had taken Rome centuries to subdue. The map of the country had been changed, almost all of the Roman names disappeared, while two Mohammedan names appeared conspicuously—Kerouan and Sidi Okba, the former the religious centre of the East, the latter that of the West. In 670 Okba bin Nafa proposed to his troops to found a city which should be the centre of Islamism forever. He conducted them to where Kerouan now is, a plain infested with wild beasts and reptiles and collected around him the companions of the Prophet who were with him and exclaimed: "Serpents and savage beasts, we are the companions of the blessed Prophet, retire; for we shall establish ourselves here."

Immediately they all peacefully retired and many of the Berbers were converted to Islamism at the sight of this wonderful miracle. Okba then planted his lance in the ground and said, "Here is your Kerouan," which means resting-place, and so gave the name to the new city. He himself planned the palace and the great mosque, and the true direction toward Mecca is believed by Mohammedans to have been miraculously revealed to him by God. For many centuries this has been the most sacred shrine in Africa and a place of pilgrimage for all

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she thought. "It's a good day to vork out. I guess I chust do something. Don'd need to let the veather go to vaste. I von'd make nothing of Sunday, not for some time to come."

She worked with extraordinary energy, enjoying every stroke as a blow in defiance of Providence; it was nearly one o'clock when she shouldered her rake and marched toward the house as one making an orderly retreat. Before going in she looked across the meadow where the grass was blowing in long ripples to the village street. "Dumb things!" she thought mockingly. "Chust go along after their noses and don'd think of nothing but vat vone tells them! Soon they go to church. They dare look if they see me there vonce."

Hearing a soft whine she threw the door open. There stood the dog. In an unexpected access of strength he had worked his bandages loose enough to move, and, tired of his long rest, had jumped off the settle. Now he was whimpering to be lifted back, for he was not strong enough to do it alone.

She gathered him up as if he were a baby and made him comfortable on his bed, and he licked her hand when she examined his breast, and laid back his ears to be rubbed. She hung over him without speaking. Then she looked at the clock; the church bell would ring in half an hour. She hurried into the bedroom and shut the door.

As she walked with her usual slow dignity up the aisle there was a whisper over the church. Her defection had been circulated by Mrs. Manbeck and the minister had been urged to interfere; now he addressed two or three portions of his sermon to her with unusual impressiveness, and she listened, attentive and calm and non-committal. After the service he made haste to leave the pulpit and shake hands with her, as did Mr. and Mrs. Manbeck and the doctor, all with an air of relief. She had not been so distinguished since her father died. She took it quietly and made her way, people turning to look after her, across the church-yard to her own lot, where the rose-bush on Elias's grave was in bud and a snow-ball drooped its greenish puffs over her baby. She rubbed the stones with her handkerchief. On the smaller one was the text of the funeral sermon:

Sie brachten auch junge Kindlein zu ihm, dass er sie sollte anrühren,

and the sight of it brought back that wretched day with the stale bitterness of a past grief, but it was again unable to shake her. She put it by.

Climbing the path where in the warmth the pines sent up a soft, pervasive sweetness like a prayer of their own, she was deeply content. She felt the comfort of the sinner who has strayed and confessed and been forgiven; no longer a pitiful Ishmaelite, she was at one with her world. Near the gate she heard a feeble bark and saw a black nose between the pickets. The dog did his best at a bow; his tail made the exuberant purple irises nod upon their stalks. She stooped to stroke him, and he followed her into the house and looked on amiably while she turned back the Taufschein and dusted it with care.

SONG

By Arthur Davison Ficke

O Love, you could not love me
Though fair I found your eyes;
Yet still, two stars above me,
They haunt my evening skies.

O Love, our day was fleeting
As all the flowers of Spring.
Yet Autumn's heart is beating
With that remembering.

Mosque of Swords, from Desert.—Kerouan.

Gateway to the Desert.—El Kantara.

After Dates.—Oasis of Sidı Okba.

The Desert, near Sidi Okba.

Precious Water.—Sidi Okba.

Great Mosque of Okba at Kerouan.

An Oasis Paradise.—Heart of the Desert.

A Desert Home.—Sidi Okba.

African Mohammedans; no Christian could enter its walls, and Jews did not even dare to approach it until the time of the French protectorate.

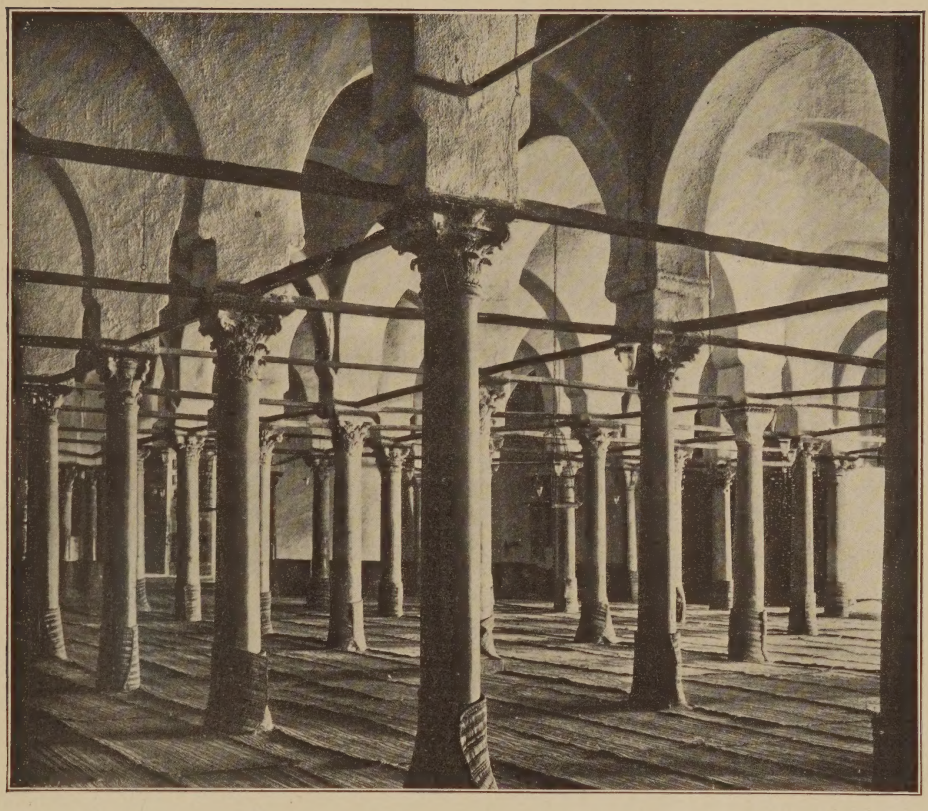
Kerouan may now be reached by rail from Tunis via Susa, but this modern method of travel offers only the inducement of saving time. The approach from the desert is imposing. The oblong city is surrounded by a crenellated wall with towers here and there, above which are seen the glittering white domes of the mosques, the huge square minaret of the great mosque towering above all. Situated in the heart of a vast semi-desert plain, the city sparkles like a white gem in a brown setting. Enveloped in deathlike silence without the walls, one is hardly prepared for the busy life of the city within the gates. Dignified individuals in picturesque costumes of many colors pass to and fro, now and then making graceful salutations as they pass; hucksters haggling with customers in a manner that seems as if an altercation was imminent; shrill cries of the auctioneer as he wanders about in search of a higher bid for his wares; dark-visaged water-carriers bent almost double under the weight of the water-skin; darker Nubians who appear to be express-wagons from the amount of merchandise they carry on their heads; curious-looking individuals in balloonlike garments of pure white moving somewhat like schooner yachts sailing wing and wing before the wind, glance with lazy liquid eyes from under eyebrows artistically blackened, betraying by their veils and trousers that they are women; the ever-present blind beggar sitting by the market gate with that doleful stereotyped expression of "Allah is great"—all tend to give an impression of the Orient that is without equal. Through the high gate one enters the market-place. And such a place! Jugglers, story-tellers, candy merchants, intermingled with sellers of hay and something that looked like alfalfa; little donkeys trotting here and there among cynical camels kneeling calmly on the ground chewing their cuds with an expression that is simply indescribable, disturbed now and then by a kick from their master simply by way of caress; groups of white burnooses seated on the ground with turbans nodding and bobbing as the cards were for or against them, the rattle of the backgammon board, the throwing of dice indicating their love of chance; the curious looms of the rope-makers who make ropes to order if the purchaser helps them twist the desired article; the cobbler who mends slippers while you wait—all these and many other curious sights entrance the stranger from the Occident. Sometimes a camel emits a doleful growling sound that is unearthly, startling the stranger into the belief that the animal is singing his death-song after the manner of the dragon in the drama of "Siegfried."

The *souks* or shops adjoining the market are simply rows of small arches in a wall just large enough for the tailor or cobbler to ply his trade. These two occupations, together with the vender of perfumes seem to monopolize the *souks* until near the end of the row, where a smith is at work repairing swords and curious specimens of guns seven or eight feet long with antiquated flintlocks. Another interesting trade is the manufacture of sieves. Pieces of leather are cut into very thin and narrow strips by means of large and clumsy scissors handled in a very clever manner by the adept. These strips are then woven together somewhat like cane in the seats of chairs. Fine sieves are made of woven horsehair. These primitive methods of manufacture are very fascinating to one accustomed to modern machinery. From the bazaars a straight street along the wall leads to the great mosque of Sidi Okba, which occupies the whole north corner of the city. It consists of three parts: a great cloistered court from which rises the lofty square minaret, the square vestibule in front of the *maksoura* or prayer-chamber, and lastly the *maksoura* itself. This is the greatest shrine of North Africa, and is very imposing. It is literally a forest of columns. There are seventeen aisles or naves, each consisting of eight or nine arches. The columns are the spoils taken from the various Roman buildings of North Africa. At a rough estimate there are over three hundred columns in the *maksoura* alone. The capitals are all of Roman character, and some of them are distinctly Christian. The entrance, or "Beautiful Gate," is of wood, beautifully sculptured, with extracts from the Koran engraved upon the doors. Directly opposite the beautiful gate is the *mihrab* or prayer-niche, the walls of which are plaster wonderfully

The New Gate.—Sidi Okba.

moulded and exquisitely painted. The walls above are covered with very old tiles, most of which are now whitewashed. The floor is covered with thick matting which is not conducive to the comfort of those who are unaccustomed to walking with bare feet for reasons that are nameless and countless. To the right of the *mihrab* is the *mimbar* or high pulpit with steps leading up to it, all of beautifully carved wood. The whole prayer-chamber is very dimly lighted by the few little colored panes of glass in the domes.

The impression conveyed by the whole *maksoura* is one of great dignity, solemnity, and simplicity, entirely in keeping with the solemn character of the God of Islam. The Desert of Sahara begins only a few miles south-west of Kerouan and is separated from the high plateau by the long chain of the Aures Mountains, which form an almost impassable barrier except at the point called El Kantara, about a hundred miles south of Constantine. This remarkable rent in the mountains, is only forty yards wide at the bottom and about two hundred yards long. The wonderfully colored limestone rocks are broken into fantastic pinnacles on both sides. Far below the little river winds its way between many boulders down toward the desert. Just south of the gorge the river widens and waters the oasis of Dahraovia, containing about 15,000 date-palms, and this is the northern limit for producing dates. El Kantara is the great gateway to the desert, and the view looking through the gorge, south to the desert, once seen can never be forgotten. About forty miles south of the gorge is the well-known oasis of Biskra, which has now become a famous winter resort. In the desert south-east of Biskra lies the oasis and sacred shrine of Sidi Okba, the famous general who led the Mohammedan army as far as Morocco, was finally



Great Mosque.—Kerouan.

murdered by a wild band of natives in the mountains, and now lies buried in the town named after him.

The Sahara is not at all as popular belief pictures it, a vast plain of moving sand, dotted here and there with fertile oases, somewhat like a leopard's skin. From Tunis westward it is a vast depression of sand and clay not much above sea-level, in some parts perfectly level, in others hilly, with low depressions containing water saltier than the sea, which generally evaporates, leaving a coating of brilliant crystals which appear like snow in the distance. The rivers from the Aures Mountains on the north serve to irrigate the oases of the Ziban; sometimes they flow above the surface, but often below it. There is a fascination about the desert that is indescribable and which none can understand unless they have spent several weeks with a caravan. At times the heat is very great, but being perfectly dry, it does not enervate as our humid atmosphere does at a temperature forty degrees lower. Near midday the desert appears to be a molten sea of dazzling, vibrating light. Now and then the mirage appears and the tired eyes of the stranger are refreshed with visions of beautiful lakes near the horizon, even sometimes of trees and moving caravans. Alas! this is a case where seeing is not believing. After many disappointments of this kind, the camels suddenly raise their heads and snuff the air through their curiously formed nostrils and move at a quicker pace, instinct telling them that water is near. In the far distance a low black line indicated palm-trees, and in a few hours the oasis of Sidi Okba appeared, distinctly relieving the doubts of those who feared it was only a mirage. Our dragoman kicked off his slippers and climbed very nimbly up a fine palm to get some of the luscious fruit growing at the top.

Nature seems to have planned the tree for this by providing steps all the way to the top. After tasting fresh ripe dates one is fully convinced that he has eaten of the lotus plant of the ancients. Through the trees were distinguishable the low mud houses and mosques of the oasis.

After a refreshing bath in the dirty water of one of the irrigating ditches, we entered the quaint little town constructed of sun-dried bricks made without straw. The streets are narrow and crooked, the dwellings only one story high, except the gateway to the market, which was really only one story over the street. The white burnooses of the inhabitants contrasted superbly against the dark-brown mud walls of the houses, making the street life very picturesque. Little children, in nature's garb, with the queer little scalp-lock bobbing about on the tops of their shaven heads, darted about among their elders with an agility that made one think of prairie-dogs with their funny little tails. Every Mohammedan wears this lock of hair, for it is by this he is to be snatched up to paradise on the last day. The tomb of Sidi Okba is the great shrine of this place, and is most jealously guarded. It is in the depths of a very old mosque of the ordinary arched style, but much smaller than one would expect for such a holy place.

The tomb is of the ordinary Marabout type, ornamented in a trashy style with silk, ostrich eggs and tawdry furniture. Upon one of the pillars is the oldest Arabic inscription in the world: "This is the tomb of Okba son of Nafa. May God have mercy upon him."

No cajolery or bribery could overcome the religious scruples of the dignified guardian of the tomb, so the camera remained concealed under the burnoose, unused. A peculiar incident occurred which offered an unusual opportunity in another direction. The son of one of the sheiks was screaming with a toothache. A quick application of creosote soon relieved the little fellow, much to the astonishment of the sympathizing friends and relatives, who looked upon the affair as miraculous. The grateful father would take no refusal, but after offering himself, his household, and all his worldly possessions, insisted on our taking a meal with him in his own home.

At last we were to be admitted to the home-life of an Arab. Doffing our slippers, we were ushered through the low, dark doorway into a little court with a room on either side. The wife was seated on the ground in a most picturesque costume of dark colors, without a veil, preparing the evening meal. Hanging on the mud walls were various pans and cooking utensils, some of which were bronze, others terra-cotta. On the floor was a brass mortar and pestle used for pulverizing the coffee. Over the fire was a large earthenware dish in which a flat cake was being cooked. Both husband and wife were so grateful to the great magician who had cured their son that all conventionalities were discarded and we all sat *en famille* and enjoyed *couscous*, dates, figs, native bread, and delicious coffee. After dinner the whole party indulged in cigarettes and more coffee. The wife was really pretty and had more expression than most of the women of the desert, especially when she gazed at her son and heir with a mother love ennobling her dark but handsome features. Had it been a daughter, all would have been different, for they are an unwelcome increase in the family, neglected and ill-treated until they are sold in marriage, a condition still worse unless they bear male children. The woman is the beast of burden, the drudge, and the general utility slave as well as the banker for the lordly husband, who could not be degraded by such a thing as labor.

The oasis of Sidi Okba is one of those watered by irrigating ditches leading from a stream in the distant mountains as well as by artesian wells. The French have cleverly ingratiated themselves with the Arabs of the desert by driving great artesian wells in many places, and wherever water is obtained there is great rejoicing, for prosperity and wealth soon follow the least exertion. Arriving from the hot, glaring desert an oasis seems to be paradise. Instead of hot burning sand, there is the cool shade of rich vegetation, a rest to the eye, while the babbling sound of water is music to the ear. A little water and a little amount of brains and energy have made the desert blossom like the rose.